

Globalisation Trends in Russian Landscape Architecture

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Globalisation in Russia

Globalisation is understood today as an “international process of global scale related to investments in financial markets which were determinate by technical modernisation” (Smirnov, 2002). Some authors also distinguish three related aspects of globalisation: economic, cultural and political (Short and Kim, 1999). The use of the term “globalisation” in Russia started in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The most commonly asked question in recent Russian sociological literature: is globalisation a phenomenon of only the 20th and 21st centuries or were there globalisation processes in the history of culture? (Proserfsky, 2003). In Russian history the most visible cultural globalisation was connected to adaptation of Orthodox Christianity and Byzantium culture in the 10th century AD. Byzantium traditions in gardening were most influential in Moscow hanging gardens and monastery gardens (Ignatieva, 1997). During the era of Peter the Great (beginning of the 18th century) fashionable “global” European principles of French formal gardens (the symbol of absolute monarchy) were adopted. Peter’s famous paradigm of the “open window to Europe” and the establishment of a new capital (St.Petersburg) is a classical example of Russian integration in “global” European culture and economy.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 introduced the idea of a united “proletariat” culture with its unique landscape architecture language of large public parks of recreation and rest (“parki kulturi i otidicha”). This was a new type of Public Park, aiming to be a “complex of culture” with a multifunctional programme (and connected zoning of a territory) which included sport, cultural and political education of communities (Bogovaya, Fursova, 1988). The new Soviet society needed such huge public parks that could accommodate thousands of people and give

them the opportunity not only for recreation, but for sport and big events (political meetings and big shows), “something as a huge club under the sky” (Kochno, 1986, 1985). Most of this Russian Soviet landscape typology was used as a model in many Eastern Block countries.

At the end of the 20th century the process of globalisation was seen in Russia as a process of Westernisation and Americanisation (Duquenne, 2006). In Russian sociological literature Westernisation is identified as imposing Western social and economical development, ideology and culture on non-Western countries. Most Russian authors also believe that in Russia, Westernisation is touching all spheres of life, not only in politics and economics, but also in ideology and culture (Zinoviev, 1999). The integration of Russia into a capitalist market economy was going very fast and it had its own peculiarities. Russian society was divided in two very unequal parts: a small proportion (5%) of very rich (“New Russians” or “Russian Capitalists”) and the majority of population (95%) that was poor or very poor (Rossiiskaya gazeta, 2007)

The globalisation process in Russia has very positive aspects, for example democratisation of the society, freedom of speech and opening the country’s boundaries. Today Russian tourists can be seen in all part of the world. Russia is integrating into different political, economical and cultural organisations internationally, and starting to be an equal part of a globalised world. Global cultural flows are recognised today in all spheres of Russian society. The most visible part of cultural globalisation is multimedia: numerous popular journals, TV shows, and films which are directly imported from Hollywood. Russian versions of Western productions have snowballed. The trends to Westernisation of architecture have been realised in the appearance of sky scrapers of an homogenised modernistic Western style in Moscow and other cities. The number of Western vehicles on city streets, and choice of food in supermarkets and restaurants is similar, or even larger, than in many Western countries. The classic symbols of Americanisation such as Coca-Cola, Burger King, McDonald’s and KFC franchises are now part of Russian urban culture. Another very important feature of acceptance of cultural globalisation in Russia is the use of English as a global language. Over the last few decades the Russian language has been “enriched” with a number of new “Anglophone” words in all spheres of economy, politics and culture: city (city), kottedzh (cottage), installytsia (installation), barbekyu (barbeque), VIPs persons, glamur (glamour).

Russian landscape architecture, as a very important part of contemporary culture, has also been experiencing globalisation trends over the last 15 years, and fully reflects all aspects of modern political and economic life in Russia. During Soviet time Russian landscape architecture was much politicised and represented the ideology of “developed socialism” and proletariat culture. Memorial public gardens, parks, squares and cemeteries were dedicated to the Revolution, Russian Civil War, its heroes and leaders (Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, Vladimir Lenin, and later, Joseph Stalin). The “Plan of the monumental propaganda” (1918) aimed to popularise the results of the Russian Revolution, and the world’s proletariat culture had an essential influence on this movement. The Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), loss of millions of people (25 million) and catastrophic destruction (1710 towns and cities were destroyed), crystallised other types of Soviet landscape architecture - namely Victory Parks, Memorial Complexes and Memorial Cemeteries. Landscape architecture projects were part of a socialist planned economy and prepared in specialised government organisations (architectural and planning offices). The only privately own gardens were “dachas”-summer-only houses with a small plot of land. This is a Slavic equivalent of a vacation house or second home. The “Dachas” movement is very Soviet and can be characterised as a survival strategy in difficult economic times (growing mainly

edible plants) and escape from busy urban life (recreational amenity) and nostalgia for country life (the majority of the Russian population before the 1917 revolution were peasants).

Private Villas for New Russians

The Post-Soviet time in Russian landscape architecture in an era of globalisation is characterized by the blooming in the construction of private villas (or cottages-kottedzhi) for “New Russians”. A big influence on the development of private landscape practice was the phenomenal globalised development of electronic multimedia and tourism opportunities, with “a continuous flow of ideas, information, commitment, values and tastes across the world, meditated through mobile individuals, symbolic tokens and electronic simulations” (Waters, 1995). After many years of a closed Soviet society under the “iron curtain,” New Russians with their financial opportunities could now travel and see different Western examples. This process can be referred to as the “hunger” for the adoption of Western style in all spheres of life (including landscape architecture). Now people were free to travel around the world and to use different design languages. This process can be interpreted as an antidote of a new society to old classical “soviet baggage” with its restrictions and rejections of the Western life style.

The number of private firms offering landscape design and construction increased dramatically in just a few years. For example in St Petersburg (population 5 million) there were 200 private landscape firms by 2003. A new class of super rich people were demanding a new model for their homes and gardens which would demonstrate their wealth (Lovell, 2003). New Russian owners of such rich estates are very demanding and dictate to landscape architects not only design ideas but even the choice of plant materials.

The main inspiration for design ideas today comes from fashionable American and European glossy magazines and travel experiences. In many scenarios, the function and essence of the garden is a misunderstanding of illusory Western aesthetics of beauty. In such favourable Westernised intellectual conditions the young Russian landscape market is pre-occupied by Western firms. We can see this in different examples from new Russian magazines “Landscape Architecture Design”, “Landscape Design” and “Sad Svoimi Rukami” (The garden made by your own hands), which clearly show the dominance of Western examples from plant nurseries to construction materials and technologies (ceramic brick, lawn and green roofs construction). The main element of all private gardens (the size can vary from a small garden to a huge estate) is a well-maintained lawn which is “a rejection of the Soviet agricultural imperative and turns towards Anglo-American civilization” (Lovell, 2003). Other very common elements of “Russian villa” design are junipers and cypresses (all arriving from European nurseries and hardly suited to the harsh Russian climate), alpinarium (rock garden) and mixed border (flower border)-photo 1. Garden furniture, Americanised kitschy details such as vases and even gnomes (symbols of new Western lifestyle) are offered on the landscape market (Pankratov, 2004). The most recent trends in private villa construction are characterised by an extreme interest in all “unusual” elements like new exotic garden species varieties with bright colours and forms. For example the latest fashion among New Russians is “tropical paradise” – the attempt to create a tropical image of gardens using native and exotic plants which can survive in the Russian climate.

Two views on Globalisation in Russian landscape architecture

Many Russian professionals are seeing the positive influence of the globalisation process in landscape architecture such as integration between cultures, opportunities for global high quality education in landscape architecture (integration of Russia in the Bologna educational process), using the advantages of advanced information systems and the democratisation of society.

At the same time many specialists agree with sociologists such as A Zinoviev, and are very concerned about losing their national identity and ignoring rich local traditions and acceptance by Russia “as an idealised image of the Western World” (Zinoviev, 2003).

Most progressive Russian landscape architects try to find their original language that addresses the unique character of Russian landscapes (native plants and addressing environmental conditions) and cultural heritage. Russian academics are concerned about the ways in which “Landscape design practice shifted to villa private constructions and very rare[ly] reacted on increasing problems of urban space” (Nefedov, 2002). Some Russian firms are involved in new urban open spaces design, aesthetic renovation of playgrounds in old and new residential districts, construction of inner yards, children and micro district parks, pedestrian city streets, waterfront design and modernisation and adaptation of public historical parks and construction of new thematic parks (e.g., Victory Park in Moscow, the park dedicated to 300 years of St.Petersburg).

Russian landscape architecture attempts to make a shift to structural optimisation of space, respect for human scale, colourful attractiveness, sustainable design and using new symbols and architectural forms. In the era of global communications and the openness of Russian society, the globalisation process is unavoidable and unstoppable. The main question for both Western and Russian landscape architects is how to combine the positive outcomes of globalised landscape architecture and the identity and unique character of Russia.



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